

*Foreword by:
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The Pastor's Handbook

**A Complete Theological & Practical
Response to Suicide**

Entering the World of the Suicide & the Bereaved

*A Good Soldier Prepares for Battle
in Times of Peace*

ASTRID STALEY

Practical Divinity in Suicide-Loss

The Shepherd Model

It is no coincidence that practical divinity is the 7th and final piece of the puzzle. The number 7 is biblically God's perfect number, and this chapter is about emulating the Great Shepherd and bringing the Father's heart into all our practical pastoral interactions. You as leader, pastor, or chaplain are the central piece of the puzzle and have the potential to make a significant difference in this area of suicide ministry. In a time of crisis, the entire Christian community is also looked to as caregiver and their ability to represent the Father's heart during one of life's unspeakable tragedies, is imperative. The Christian community will look to you as their leader for direction during this time, and if you are unprepared with a response, the community will wander around in confusion. Your role is a God-ordained role, and the bereaved will come to you for comfort, direction, and above all, hope. As you become a *fellow pilgrim* in the journey with the bereaved in their search for a reason to *re-invest* into life again, you now enter this war informed, equipped and armed with an understanding of the complexity of the pieces of the puzzle involved in suicide bereavement.

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Grief ministry is a chaotic '*spiritual pilgrimage*' with the bereaved. As we participate in the life of the bereaved we become "*travellers between life and death*,"¹ fellow pilgrims in their journey of re-investing into life again. Re-investing into life will mean something different for each bereaved person. Some may need to find their own reason to continue to *choose life over death*, and for others the need will be to "*rebuild sources of meaning and pleasure in their life that are untainted by suicide*."² Whilst a host of mitigating influences contribute to the decline of a person's physical, emotional and mental states, what is clear is that their journey to wholeness to some degree will necessitate the assistance of people; hence, the pastoral participation can either *frustrate or contribute meaningfully* to this journey.³

In dealing with any death, both the carer and the bereaved come face-to-face with the realization of their personal mortality, a subject

preferably avoided. Questions that naturally arise from tragedy and demand a response is, *where* God is in this, and *why* did He let this happen. Ministers and congregations are often ill-equipped to embark on the journey; therefore, the suicide-bereaved person is readily handballed to secular psychologists. However, a secular psychologist may be unable or unwilling to give a spiritual perspective. If the spiritual aspect is absent, this may leave the griever confused and bitter towards God, and the Christian community that has upon it a God-ordained mandate to look after them. We are not called to do things perfectly, but are called to *do our best* and to *reflect the Father's heart* in all we do.

*'Doctors of the soul,'*⁴ *'agents of hope,'*⁵ and *'shepherds,'* are often used titles for ministers. In pastoral care God is *'re-presented'* in as much as, the carer is present and enters the story *being present* with and listening to the bereaved, as God is present with us and hears us and enters our story as highlighted in chapter 23 of the Shepherd Psalm. *Presence* does not necessarily demand a verbal response to grief talk. Attempting to offer comforting words determined to bring relief, may not necessarily provide such. A healthier outcome can ensue by being a *'silent presence'* especially as the bereaved shakes their fist at God. Grief words are a reflection of a person's attempt to make sense of the circumstances and reconcile what has happened with their existing worldview. Job's comforters, who sat in silence with him for 7 days and nights before they spoke, highlight this notion of *'ministry of presence.'* A pastor that is willing to endure with the bereaved past the initial weeks will *"strengthen the relationship of that person to the faith community they represent."*⁶

Pastor is derived from the Latin word, *shepherd*, and the imagery of the shepherd in Scripture is a *meaning rich metaphor* for pastors as the Shepherd Psalm highlights. From a biblical understanding, the lifestyle of a shepherd was to live with his sheep, to know each sheep by name, sense when they were sick and not rest until the one that went missing was found and restored to the fold (Lk.15:1-7). Their task was to lead them to pastures for nourishment, rest and protect them from danger of wild animals and thieves. Paul in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, admonished them to shepherd the church of God under their care, with watchfulness (Acts 20:21).

Our Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, was one who was acquainted with our sorrows and grief (Is.53:3).⁷ Our Great Shepherd walked with the downtrodden, He expressed compassion and entered their story. In so doing, He brought healing physically, emotionally and spiritually. He restored a person's soul and their identity; subsequently, some for the very first time were able to participate in the religious and social community, from which they had

been alienated (Ps.23:3). He is a Shepherd who went so far as to lay down His life for His sheep, retrieving humanity from their utter lostness and recklessness, restoring them to new life in Him.⁸ Christ is the role model for all under-shepherds. They, like Him, need to be people acquainted with grief and sorrows bringing healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually, caring for His sheep, to which they have been entrusted. Certainly, this is not an easy task, one analogous to the life of a shepherd. The pastor is similarly a person who is “*characterized by compassion, courage and a mixture of tenderness and toughness.*”⁹ The challenge we face in suicide ministry is addressing the question, *where* God is in the equation.

God & Suffering

Either God is in the *midst of our suffering* or He sits aloof, indifferent, and detached from His creation. The God of the Psalmist was a God of the valleys and the mountains, there was no place that the arm of God was unable to reach. When we engage with those who are suffering, we often feel the need to justify God, rationalize Him, or explain the reason for suffering and evil. However, to embark on such a quest is futile, for some things are outside our ability to fully comprehend and cannot be apprehended until we see Him face-to-face. What the biblical narratives firmly convey is that God is with us in *every situation*. We bring this comfort into our pastoral ministry, that though the bereaved feel alone, and cannot see it; the reality is that God is in the midst of the chaos with them. He is not only present in the bereaved’s suffering, but He is also present to the very end in the suffering of the deceased, *regardless of the mode of death.*¹⁰

There is nothing in Scripture that suggests that God deserts those who are His, in fact, Paul would state otherwise that nothing could separate us from His love (Rom.8). To say otherwise is to create a God reflective of our human limitations. Those who die by suicide are suffering; their suffering is different to the bereaved person, but suffering never the less. The Psalmist laments that no one stood with him in his affliction, but only God stood with him (Ps.38). The Job narrative highlights God’s presence, which satisfies Job, despite the fact he has been unable to solve the mystery of suffering.¹¹ As Christ when He walked the earth entered the suffering of others, so God enters our suffering, regardless of the shape it takes.

He alone sees the complexity of our biological and psychological makeup. He sees all the accumulated experiences that have brought the person to their final moment. He sees the demonic interference that is constantly driving His creation to ruination. No matter how closely the bereaved or the minister walked with the deceased, God sees what we cannot, and knows things we do not; therefore, we can bring the Father's heart with confidence into all suffering, *stating unequivocally that He is ever present in suffering, and death*. Painting a beautiful picture of what transpired on the cross, Miroslav Volf states

*... the sufferings of Christ on the cross are not just His sufferings; they are the sufferings of the poor and weak, which Jesus shares in His own body and in His own soul, in solidarity with them.*¹²

The following presents some challenges that are bound up in our Christian worldviews and are hindrances to effective suicide ministry. We may recognize these issues within our own thinking, if so, we may need to confront these if we are to emulate the Great Shepherd and minister the Father's heart to the bereaved.

Potential Challenges to Effective Suicide Ministry

1. Grief-lite Culture

There is a reality that we live in a 'grief-lite' culture, one that feels awkward engaging with people's grief and skirts around the subject or avoids contact with the bereaved.¹³ For the most part, suffering appears meaningless; it is neither heroic nor part of some noble crusade like martyrdom for Christ. Suffering comes to us all, we cannot make sense of it, are often driven to silence, numbed by it, and paralyzed in our emotions and will when confronted with it.¹⁴ Emotionally charged or socially ambiguous issues are uncomfortable to intersect; therefore, we avoid interpersonal situations that might confront our own vulnerabilities. Undeniably, suicide death "*causes fear and confusion and disrupts grief conversations.*"¹⁵ We desire our interactions to be uplifting and encouraging, shying away from those who are not able to contribute to us 'feeling' good. Suffering makes us uncomfortable, can tend to embarrass us, particularly if we subscribe to a health and prosperity gospel. We

might even believe that associating with suffering will make us susceptible to the same.¹⁶ When we get around those going through difficulties, we see them as bringing us down, and sidestep them so we can maintain our '*feeling status*.' Larry Crabb writes on this avoidance mentality saying,

*... the experience of groaning, however, is precisely what modern Christianity so often tries to help us escape. The gospel of health and wealth appeals to our legitimate longing for relief by skipping over the call to endure suffering.*¹⁷

Churches have the potential for being *therapeutic communities* where people could feel welcomed by providing strength and friendship support, enabling people to cope better through these times.¹⁸ The Christian community as a whole can be a great source of comfort when the *entire community* carries the suffering of one of its own. The *collective mourning* or *collective denial* of the community betrays its understanding of the *inter-generational* phenomenon of mourning.¹⁹ The *inter-generational phenomenon* is mourning witnessed in the descendants of survivors of trauma. Some suggest it is a form of *disenfranchised grief* and is very prevalent where there has been a loss of a child.²⁰ A further challenge to effective suicide ministry is *ascribing guilt*.

2. Ascribing Guilt

Further exacerbating this inability to engage with the suffering, are certain characteristics within the Christian worldview. One issue is that of *ascribing guilt*. We want to blame someone, the deceased, the bereaved person, or the system. This is self-evident in our theology of salvation. Anchored in the narrative of Genesis chapter three, blame is ascribed in the first human parents' disobedience, eliciting specific consequences.²¹ We note this also in Job's narrative when his comforters broke their silence, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in chapters 3-31 are very eager to blame Job for his predicament. Eliphaz said Job *brought it upon himself* because he had sinned. They accuse Job of *abandoning prayer* and the *fear of God* (15:2-4) and attempt to identify *specific sins* that have caused this problem (22:4-7). Bildad concludes that Job *must be a hypocrite* because *God would not abandon a blameless person* (8:20). Suffering was a sign of *divine judgment* (18:3) therefore; God was *punishing Job* for his evil, telling Job that he should look to God, implying an admission of guilt (8:5). Zophar suggests Job *is a wicked man*, and that Job's

punishment was no less than can be reasonably expected (11:6) in fact, the *punishment was less than he actually deserved!*

The need to assign guilt becomes more pronounced in discussions surrounding an act that is considered against the giver of life, a desertion of one's earthly post and one that society as a whole shuns as an act of desertion against family and community.²² The following comment by Kant reflects some of the extreme negative judgment against suicide past and present, where he unabashedly states,

*... we are horrified at the very thought of suicide; by it man sinks lower than beasts; we look upon suicide as carrion ... (O)ne who attempts suicide loses claim to human worth in our eyes and we are free to treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for sport as we do a horse or a dog, for he is no longer a human being; he has made a thing of himself, and, having himself discarded his humanity, he cannot expect that others should respect humanity in him.*²³

These are truly brutal words by the German Kant. His words betray a lack of understanding of the *mitigating influences* associated with suicide. By extension, this mindset ultimately suggests they are *unworthy of the cross*, a view totally incongruent with Scripture or the heart of God. The question as to the person's *eternal security* follows on from this worldview as an issue.

3. *Eternal Security*

Another Christian worldview that arises in suicide ministry is the *eternal security* of a Christian person who dies by suicide. If the minister has not settled this question for themselves and cannot hold to a *high view of salvation*, this can impede the care of those bereaved by suicide, as they will not feel confident in confronting this inevitable question. The minister's position will further influence the wider church community's ability to minister confidently in this area in crisis, as they expect their leader to speak knowledgeably to this vital concern. This worldview can also be reflective of one's *own negative biases*, not merely reflection of an inadequate view of salvation.

4. *Imposing Our Negative Biases On God*

Imposing our negative personal biases on God is an additional hindrance to effective suicide ministry. We feel somewhat challenged in our assumptions about humanity when confronted with the ugly side of human nature that attempts ending life or self-harms. We find it difficult to be gracious in such circumstances towards those who have ended their lives through violence or are on a merry-go-round of perpetual self-harm, as we are the ones that *become intertwined* in the suffering of the bereaved person, and watch the emotional, mental and physical *havoc wreaked* in the lives of those left behind. We are confronted with our own *felt helplessness* in the situation, desperate to bring relief, yet unable. We see the act as a selfish, self-centered act, and one that by default has stripped others of a happy future. Quite possibly, we were involved in caring for the deceased before they took their life, and now left dealing with our own emotional fallout, feelings of guilt, and felt betrayal. We may come to a point of believing that they had received so much help, having rejected it, God thereby rejects them. We see the assistance rendered by the family or ourselves as though it was God's final offer, equating this rejection with rejecting God, therefore they are forever lost.

However, our negative personal biases cannot be imposed on God, as the *love of God knows no limitations*. The greatest love story in the history of the world was embodied in Christ nailed to the cross. For those who say yes to Christ, His love is more than sufficient to embrace humanity bereft of any ability to save themselves. As a believing community, we play a critical role in *incarnating this love*, through *holding the bereaved person* and *forgiving those who have tragically ended their life through suicide*.

5. *Personal Proximity*

When a pastor and believing community are confronted by a death by suicide in their midst, a huge pressure is now brought to bear on the pastor. In a crisis of this nature, there is a significant pushing of the systems into a state of disequilibrium until all its members re-adjust to a new reality. The minister will also experience a measure of disequilibrium, further compounded by their *personal proximity* to the person who died. They could have been a mentor, family member or the pastor could have been a mentor to the deceased, or it may have been their own child or

relative. There is a greater level of complexity to the pastor role. The pastor is involved in three distinct family systems within the congregation: the families within the congregation, the congregation, and their own family.²⁴

The same complexity is evident with chaplains who experience this tragedy within a school setting. They too are involved in the following three distinct systems, *the teaching community, fellow students and the family of the deceased*. In addition, added into the mix is the chaplain's own proximity to the deceased, whom they may have been trying to assist over a period of time. The dynamic of family systems is inescapable as reflected in Paul's body metaphor, which maintains the *interdependence* of all the parts, that should *one part suffer the whole body will suffer* (1Cor.12:26). Pain or dysfunction in any one part of the body sees the rest of the body mobilize to either carry the pain or alleviate it through practical directions from the brain centre.²⁵

Where a pastor, leader or chaplain finds themselves in too close a *proximity to the deceased*, it is imperative that they know their *limitations*, understand how this is affecting them, and have a network of people who can come in and assist. The carer is now in need of care and should not hesitate to ensure they obtain appropriate support.²⁶ The first rule in First Aid is *determining the risk to self*, so you do not become a casualty as well. If this is the case, honesty before leaders, church, and community where we are serving, ensures that the community does not feel abandoned in the time of crisis. People will always honour transparency, but will frown upon evasion at these crucial times. The *Christian community as a whole plays a critical role in incarnating Christ's love*, as they too become fellow pilgrims in the journey of meaning-making of the bereaved person. Therefore, it is imperative that the church as a whole is reminded what a healing community looks like so they can facilitate healing, which we will next explore.

Healing Community

When we ponder the word healing, we more often focus on the instantaneous kind, where God miraculously intervenes in a set of circumstances. Miraculous healing is our most desired form of healing; however, healing in a broader perspective incorporates *prevention* of ill health, *promotion* of good health including *recovery* of health.

Health embraces more than merely being disease free; it encompasses the *body, soul, mind and spirit* of a person. It can be a combination of maintaining physical fitness, quieting the mind and having a sense of worth and purpose in life.²⁷ Maintaining the balance is essential to wellbeing, and providing an environment where people can thrive is all the more imperative. Bereaved people in our midst can exert a significant pressure on the pastoral care network, especially within the first 6-12 months following a tragedy of this nature, hence, why it is essential that communities as a whole are *facilitators of healing*. The word *facilitator* refers to somebody who *enables* a process to happen, someone who *helps* a person or organization to find a solution to a problem (Gal.6:2; Rom.15:1; Jas.5:14-15).

Obstacles to facilitating healing can revolve around *fear* and prove to be a significant inhibitor to engaging in this healing pilgrimage journey with the bereaved. Fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of confronting death stories, fear of facing our own mortality, fear of feeling the need to justify God in the tragedy, fear of facing theological issues in suicide, fear of how the interaction will affect us emotionally, and the time and energy it may require engaging with those bereaved by suicide. Having a clear picture in one's thinking of how to approach the situation and the aspects of the journey, empowers one to overcome these fears.

Essential in facilitating healing is the need for *empathy*, which means to have the ability to *identify with* and *understand* somebody else's feelings or difficulties, to *put oneself in their shoes*. It is the ability to understand how someone feels because you can imagine what it is like to be them. One will never *fully know* what it is to endure what another is experiencing, however, one can imagine what *we might desire* should we be placed in that same tragic situation. The greatest resource within the body of Christ is the diversity of people and tapping into that in times of tragedy.

If you would like to purchase the entire book, which elaborates on the complexity of this topic, and offers some key strategies, please go to:

Lulu Publishing

<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/staley2atbigpondnetdotau>

Endnotes

- ¹ Oates, 1997: 31.
- ² Jordan, 2011: 201.
- ³ Yarhouse, 2005: 50.
- ⁴ Peterson, 2007: 26.
- ⁵ Capps, 2001: 1-7; Vande Kemp, 1987.
- ⁶ Patton, 2005: 21-22, 32, 57-59; 1995: 26-27; Peterson, 2007; Benner, 1992; Hurdling, 1994.
- ⁷ London, 2005: 105-110.
- ⁸ Keller, 1987: 156.
- ⁹ Oates, 1997: 20; Yarhouse, et. al., 2005; Tidball, 1999.
- ¹⁰ Buxton, 2005: 236.
- ¹¹ Fiddes, 2000: 156.
- ¹² Volf, *quoting* Moltmann, 1996: 22.
- ¹³ 1997: 20; Peterson, 2007: 240.
- ¹⁴ Fiddes, 2000: 157.
- ¹⁵ Sands, 2011: 264.
- ¹⁶ Fiddes, 2000: 155.
- ¹⁷ Crabb, 1988: 14-18.
- ¹⁸ Durkheim, 1951: 16; Collins, 1988: 117; Oates, 1997; Yarhouse, et. al., 2005.
- ¹⁹ Patton, 1993: 129; Landau, & Saul, 2004.
- ²⁰ Kempson, et. al., 2008 271-284.
- ²¹ Beck, & Demarest, 2005: 323.
- ²² Cozolino, 2006: 234.
- ²³ *Quoted in* Seidler, 1983: 440.
- ²⁴ Friedman, 1985; Beck, & Demarest, 2005; Landau, & Saul, 2004.
- ²⁵ Kraft, C., 2010: 168.
- ²⁶ Rothschild, 2006, *a good resource on compassion fatigue, burnout and stress*.
- ²⁷ Carrington, 1969: 152.